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Urdu vocabulary, script and grammar: A learner's suggestions

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Abstract

The type of learner who is learning Urdu is changing: learners of Urdu may now be older professionals who lack language backgrounds and are learning Urdu as a first second language for either personal reasons (such as marriage into the South Asian diaspora) or professional reasons (such as working with Urdu-speaking colleagues or customers). This paper argues that current resources for Urdu are often inappropriate for this type of learner. It details the author's suggestions as a learner of Urdu, namely: that (1) vocabulary resources for Urdu should include everyday vocabulary and indicate the gender, category and pronunciation of any entry, (2) there is a more efficient way of teaching Urdu script that does not centre on four letter forms ("final", "medial", "initial" and "isolated") and (3) there is a more efficient way of describing certain grammatical features of Urdu, such as categories of word, the oblique case and gender. This paper attempts thereby to break away from more traditional ways of teaching grammar and script. As an avenue of future research, it suggests that the same principles suggested for increasing the efficiency of specific grammatical descriptions in Urdu could also be applied in more widely taught languages.

Keywords: Urdu vocabulary, Urdu script, Urdu grammar, pedagogical grammar, learner suggestions

Introduction

This paper presents a learner's experience of learning Urdu. It suggests that the type of learner who is learning Urdu is changing and describes the implications of this change on resources available for learners. It suggests that current resources are often problematic for this type of learner and the author's own suggestions are presented in terms of the changes that could be made to (1) dictionaries and

vocabulary resources, (2) the way Urdu script is currently taught and (3) the analysis of certain features of Urdu grammar.

Urdu language learners: Two stereotypes

Two types of Urdu language learners might be posited. The first type might be considered young (late-teenage to early twenties) learners, who may have recently completed A Levels in more widely taught languages, such as French and German (Brown, 2009). These learners may now be studying Urdu as part of a South Asian Studies degree or an Islamic Studies programme, either at Bachelors or Masters level. Being younger, and being full-time students, they may not have many professional or personal commitments. This second type of Urdu learner might be identified as older professionals, who are learning Urdu in a part-time community college setting, where hours per week are limited (see Brown, 2009 for a discussion of the demographics of lesser taught language students in general). These learners may already be established both professionally and personally and their motives for learning Urdu may be similarly professional or personal; they may have married into or work with members of the South Asian community (see Phinney et al., 2001 for a wider discussion of the personal motivations of lesser taught language learners). The last time such learners attempted to learn a language may have been when they were school pupils (which may have been around 20 or 30 years prior) and they may not be as comfortable accessing and using the online materials that are necessary due to the comparative lack of resources for lesser taught languages (see Godwin-Jones 2013; Winke et al., 2010). These learners may have no formal qualifications at all; for all intents, Urdu may be their first second language (see Wynne, no date, for a further general discussion of adult learners).

These two stereotypes are of course extremes and such students do exist for all languages; however, for Urdu, it is perhaps the second type of learner that either predominates or will predominate in the future. This could be due to the growing South Asian diaspora and the subsequent interest in Urdu among people who are related to, marrying into or working with those communities (see Anderson, 2011 for a discussion of learners who begin a lesser taught language with an existing background or relationship to that language).

If the second type of learner is the more dominant, this has an important implication for the materials that are available for these learners. As a learner of Urdu, I argue in this paper that current materials for Urdu, unlike materials for more widely taught languages, are in some ways inappropriate for this second

type of learner. Specifically, I have identified three areas in which current materials available for Urdu learners might be improved: (1) dictionaries and other vocabulary resources, (2) the current way of teaching Urdu script and (3) standard presentations of certain features of Urdu grammar.

Urdu dictionaries: Three areas of learner frustration

It is my experience that there are three main issues with many of the Urdu dictionaries that are available currently for learners. In the following discussion, it is important to consider both traditional printed dictionaries and similar online vocabulary resources, given that, for many learners, the first stop when looking up a word in their target language is an online search engine or mobile app (see Blackenship & Hinnebusch, 2013, for a survey of current digital resources for many lesser taught languages, including Urdu).

Gender and parts of speech

The first obvious problem with many currently available dictionaries and online resources is that they often lack the extra grammatical information that is considered standard in dictionaries for more widely taught languages, namely: gender and parts of speech. As a typical example, one might search for the word “watch” in the online vocabulary resource urduword.com (2011). Two results are given (see Figure 1).

English	Urdu Script	Roman Urdu
Watch	گھڑی	gharhi
Watch	دیکھنا	daykhna

Figure 1: Results of the search for “watch” using urduword.com (2011)

There are, of course, multiple meanings of the word “watch” in English. There is the verb “watch” (as in: “I *watched* that new series on iPlayer”) and the noun “watch” (“I don’t wear a *watch* these days”). It is essential for any learner to be able to distinguish the two; however, the results shown in urduword.com (2011) do not distinguish between these two interpretations. Of course, a learner who is familiar with the grammar of Urdu might be able to decode that دیکھنا denotes the verb “watch”, given that دیکھنا ends in the infinitive ending نا, and thus may then, by a process of elimination, presume that گھڑی denotes the noun “watch”.

Furthermore, if the learner was able to do this, he or she might then work out that گھڑی is a feminine noun, given that it ends in ی.

But no such assumption can or should be made for any learner—and particularly for learners of Urdu, who, as mentioned previously, may not have the grammatical background to know what a noun, verb or infinitive ending is in the first place.

Who is the audience?

There also seems to be some confusion in some dictionaries and online resources about the intended audience. For instance, in the previous example, urduword.com (2011), the problem described is only an issue for English-speaking learners of Urdu. Not including gender or parts of speech is not an issue for Urdu-speaking learners of English because these learners would already know that دیکھنا is an infinitive and گھڑی is a noun (whether they are conscious of these formal terms or not). It is my impression that many vocabulary resources that are billed for beginners are not, in fact, designed for beginner *English*-speaking learners of Urdu at all—instead, they seem to be designed for *Urdu*-speaking learners of English.

For instance, the first impression a learner might have of the print dictionary Crawley (2002) is that this resource is a dictionary for English speakers who are beginning to learn Urdu. On closer inspection, the dictionary is clearly designed for native-speaking Urdu learners of English. Although the learner can look up an English word and a definition is given in Urdu of that word, only rarely is there a one-to-one translation that an English-speaking learner might easily understand. Although the dictionary is clearly labelled as an “English-to-Urdu” dictionary, it could be argued that it is only really useful for Urdu speakers translating a word they encounter in English—not for English speakers who want an Urdu translation of an English word.

The difference is subtle but I believe indicative of the “real” intended audience: Urdu speakers. Evidence for this is the fact that phonetic indication is only given for English words, along with parts of speech for the English words—no such information is given for Urdu translations (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Sample entries from Crawley (2002)

The use of “unpointed” Urdu script also indicates the “real” audience. Any resource for beginners (if the audience is intended to be English-speaking learners) that contains “unpointed” Urdu script or that does not otherwise indicate the pronunciation of a given word is not going to be as useful as one that does (which is also the case with resources for other Arabic script languages). This is like producing an Urdu-to-English dictionary in which all the English words lack vowels:

بلی	ct	n.	a small feline animal
بچے کا پلنگ	ct	n.	a baby's bed
کاٹنا	ct	v.	to shear or separate with a blade
پیارا	ct	a.	pretty or lovely

Without an indication of how to pronounce words in Urdu script (through either the in-built use of symbols such as کسرہ, فتحہ and ضمہ or an English-script approximation of pronunciation), such a resource is primarily only useful for learners who *already* know how to pronounce those words—namely: Urdu-speaking learners of English or, more usually, Urdu-speaking learners who are learning how to write in Urdu:

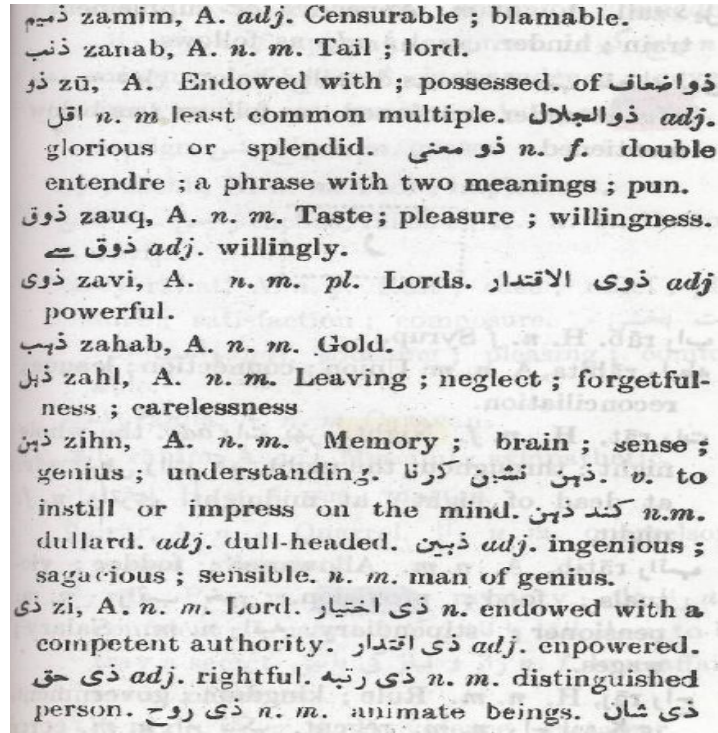
بلی	cat	n.	a small feline animal
بچے کا پلنگ	cot	n.	a baby's bed
کاٹنا	cut	v.	to shear or separate with a blade
پیارا	cute	a.	pretty or lovely

It may also be the case that these authors are presuming that learners will be learning in a formal classroom context—that all learners have access to a teacher who can help scaffold their learning and explain complex structures. Again, no such assumption should be made for any learner, especially for older professionals, who may not have the time to access a classroom context. Likewise, it has been my experience that classes that are billed for “beginners” in Urdu often are, for all practical purposes, Urdu literacy classes for native speakers, who, as mentioned above, already know how to pronounce words in Urdu and only need to match their mental pronunciations with the shapes of the words on the page.

؟ رجل *or* مرد، آدمی: “man”

The third issue with many dictionaries for Urdu is that many of the vocabulary items included are not ones that are used in the everyday spoken Urdu that beginners presumably want to acquire (particularly those learners with spoken communicative goals, such as communicating with Urdu-speaking relatives or colleagues). There may be several reasons for this. One reason may be an appeal to an earlier period in which words of Persian or Arabic origin were more commonly (and consciously) used in Urdu. This persists in modern times, as the inclusion of Arabic and Persian-origin words further distinguishes Urdu from its sister language—and political and linguistic rival—Hindi (see Khan, 2006 and Rahman, 2011).

An example of this might be found in Sabri (2001). In many ways, this is an excellent resource for learners. In addition to indicating the pronunciation of Urdu words, this print dictionary also indicates gender and parts of speech; likewise, English translations are short and readable. However, it is not a two-way dictionary and the reason for this is perhaps evident in the fact that the etymology of each word is given (words are identified as Arabic, English, Persian, Turkish or Sanskrit origin) (see Figure 3).



ذمیم zamim, A. <i>adj.</i>	Censurable ; blamable.
ذنب zanab, A. <i>n. m.</i>	Tail ; lord.
ذو zū, A. <i>n. m.</i>	Endowed with ; possessed. of ذواضعاف
اقل <i>n. m.</i>	least common multiple. ذوالجلال <i>adj.</i>
	glorious or splendid. ذو معنی <i>n. f.</i>
	double entendre ; a phrase with two meanings ; pun.
ذوق zauq, A. <i>n. m.</i>	Taste ; pleasure ; willingness.
ذوق سے <i>adj.</i>	willingly.
ذوی zavi, A. <i>n. m. pl.</i>	Lords. ذوی اقتدار <i>adj.</i>
	powerful.
ذہب zahab, A. <i>n. m.</i>	Gold.
ذہل zahl, A. <i>n. m.</i>	Leaving ; neglect ; forgetfulness ; carelessness
ذہن zihn, A. <i>n. m.</i>	Memory ; brain ; sense ; genius ; understanding. ذہن نشین کرنا <i>v.</i>
	to instill or impress on the mind. ذہن کند <i>n. m.</i>
	dullard. <i>adj.</i> dull-headed. ذہین <i>adj.</i> ingenious ; sagacious ; sensible. <i>n. m.</i> man of genius.
ذی zi, A. <i>n. m.</i>	Lord. ذی اختیار <i>n.</i> endowed with a competent authority. ذی اقتدار <i>adj.</i> empowered.
ذی حق <i>adj.</i>	rightful. ذی رتبہ <i>n. m.</i> distinguished person. ذی شان <i>n. m.</i> animate beings.

Figure 3: Sample entries from Sabri (2001)

Essentially, many words that are included in this resource are not used in modern, everyday Urdu—at least for the translation given. For instance, in addition to آدمی, this resource also contains both the Arabic رجل, the Persian مرد, and even the Sanskrit पुरुष—all of which are translated as “man”; in fact, if this resource were a two-way dictionary, for any given English word, multiple translations would have to be given to account for words of different etymologies. Clearly, as a resource for beginners, and one that should reflect the modern use of Urdu, this is somewhat impractical.

If it can be done for Hindi...

The excuse for these three problems cannot be that Urdu is a lesser taught language or that Urdu is not a “European” language, which are often posited as somehow “more familiar”. After English, the top five most spoken languages in England and Wales are Panjabi, Urdu, Bengali and Gujarati, with Polish coming in second only due to recent migration (see Language in England and Wales, 2011, 2013). Urdu is an Indo-European language (Pereltsvaig, 2012; Lewis et al., 2015) and so shares structural and lexical similarities with not only English but also other “European” languages (see Pereltsvaig, 2012 and Schmidt, 2004); the fact that Urdu is written in a different script should not justify viewing it as somehow “exotic” and accepting materials that would perhaps be considered problematic for more widely taught languages like French, German and Spanish.

Equally, there are precedents for effective vocabulary resources for lesser taught languages. Snell (2004) is a resource for Hindi that includes all the positive points identified above and none of the negative points. This resource is a print dictionary of everyday words in Hindi for a beginning learner. Not only is it a two-way dictionary that identifies both gender and parts of speech but it also offers short and simple translations, includes the original Hindi script and an indication of pronunciation, details useful related expressions for common words and highlights words that may be particularly problematic for the English-speaking learner (see Figure 4).

<p>A</p> <p>a एक <i>ek</i>; (a certain) कोई <i>koī</i> — a man is asking where you are कोई आदमी पूछ रहा है कि तुम कहाँ हो <i>koī ādmī pūch rahā hai ki tum kahā ho</i></p> <p>abandon, to छोड़ना <i>choṛnā</i>* — abandon this idea इस खयाल को छोड़ो [छोड़ दो] <i>is khyāl ko choro [chor do]</i></p>	<p>this matter इस बात को लेकर <i>is bāt ko lekar</i>; to be about to do something: the oblique infinitive takes a वाला <i>vālā</i> suffix — she was just about to go वह अभी जानेवाली थी <i>vah abhī jānevālī thī</i></p> <p>above के ऊपर <i>ke ūpar</i> — above the door दरवाज़े के ऊपर <i>darvāze ke ūpar</i></p>
<p>Insight</p> <p>ABC – in Hindi, the ‘ABC’ of a subject is its ‘क-ख-ग’ – referencing the first three consonants in the syllabary.</p>	
<p>able (capable) समर्थ <i>samarth</i>; to be able सकन <i>saknā</i> (follows verb stem) — he is able to</p>	<p>abroad विदेश <i>videś</i> — we’re going abroad हम विदेश जा रहे हैं <i>ham videś jā rahe hāī</i></p>

Figure 4: Sample entries from Snell (2004)

If such resources can be produced for Hindi, then they can certainly be produced for Urdu. (Since this paper was written, a new, two-way Urdu dictionary that indicates gender and pronunciation and focuses on everyday vocabulary has been published. See Masud, 2015, for details of this excellent resource.)

The current method of teaching Urdu script: Two problematic traditions

The way that Urdu script is usually taught also presents two problems for the learner. The first applies to many resources for Urdu while the second applies to resources for both Urdu and, in fact, all Arabic script languages.

نسخ or نستعلیق : Printed or cursive?

While resources for Arabic (and often for Persian) use the نسخ style of Arabic script, resources for Urdu often use the نستعلیق version of the script (as an example, see Delacy, 2010 and see Eteraz, 2013 for an interesting discussion of the necessity of using نسخ online):

نسخ نستعلیق

When analysing these two styles, it is immediately apparent that, for a learner, نستعلیق will probably be harder to read and acquire. One reason for this is because, whereas نسخ is written on a single horizontal line, words in نستعلیق often (but not always) descend diagonally:

نسخ نستعلیق

Likewise, نستعلیق letter forms are less obvious; نسخ letters are more uniform in terms of both size, form and the placement of dots above or below the letters:

نسخ

English-speaking beginner learners (or, indeed, Urdu-speaking learners beginning to learn the script) would most likely find resources written in نسخ easier to read; likewise, they would likely find writing words in نسخ easier. Once a learner has learned the نسخ style, he or she could then move on to the more difficult نستعلیق. In my view, it is much harder to start with نستعلیق, as many resources billed for beginners do (see, for example, Delacy 2010 and Asani & Hyder, 2008)—doing so is like learning how to write cursively in English before learning printed letters:

Kaun sa ziaadah aasaan hei?

Kaun sa ziaadah aasaan hei?

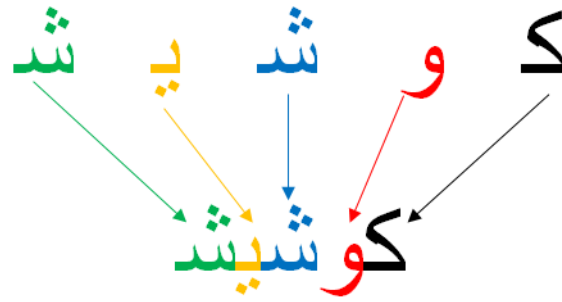
“Bodies” and “tails”: An alternative to learning four letter forms

There is, however, a more fundamental problem with how most resources teach Urdu script. The current way of teaching Urdu script asserts that each letter has four forms: a “final” form, “medial” form, “initial” form and “isolated” form (see Hashmi, 1984, 1986, Delacy, 2008, James, 2011, Taj & Caldwell, no date and The Arabic Letters – Different positions: Initial, medial and final, no date as examples); essentially, it is the learner’s job to memorise four forms for each Urdu script letter (see Figure 5).

final	medial	initial	isolated
ط	ط	ط	ط
ف	ف	ف	ف
ق	ق	ق	ق
ل	ل	ل	ل
گ	گ	گ	گ

Figure 5: Final, medial, initial and isolated letter forms
(adapted from James, 2011)

There is, however, an arguably more logical and efficient way of learning the same amount of information (see Young, 2013 or Young, 2014a for a fuller discussion of this method). Essentially, this involves ignoring the final and medial forms. This is possible because the vast majority of Urdu script letters consist of only two parts: the first part is the “body” and the second part is the “tail”. The body can be considered the core shape of each letter; when writing Urdu script, the body of the letter is like the letter on a keyboard. Bodies appear next to each other in exactly the same manner that letters in Roman script follow one from the other, the only difference being that Urdu script letters are written so close together that they actually touch:



Viewed this way, the learner does not even have to think about final, medial, initial or isolated forms at all; if the body of each Urdu script letter is considered the primary element that is learned, all the learner has to do is add one letter to the next—in exactly the same way that Roman script letters appear after each other when typing.

The one difference of course is that, in Urdu script, at the end of words, most final bodies take tails:



However, tails are not that “exotic”. In fact, English has a similar feature: *capital letters*. At the beginning of some English words, any given letter may be written in a special form: a capital letter. Just as, for each letter in Urdu script, the learner needs to learn two forms (the body and tail), the learner of English also needs to learn two forms (upper and lowercase) for each letter in English script (which is arguably a bigger challenge than learning a simple tail extension). When learning Urdu script, instead of four different forms for every letter, all the learner needs to learn for any letter is a body and any attached tail:



Of course, some bodies do not have tails; therefore, at the end of a word, no tail is attached:



Likewise, there are some Urdu script letters that are exceptions; for example, ہ, ی and ع. It would perhaps be more efficient learning these letters the usual way, namely: learning the final, medial, initial and isolated forms separately (see Figure 6). However, overall, simply learning bodies and tails seems to me a much more efficient way of learning Urdu script.

final	medial	initial	isolated
ہ	ہ	ہ	ہ
ی	ی	ی	ی
ع	ع	ع	ع

Figure 6: Final, medial, initial and isolated forms of ہ, ی and ع
(adapted from James, 2011)

Redundant grammatical analyses: Multiple word categories, the oblique case and gender

The third and final problem that is evident in many resources for Urdu is the over-analysis of grammar. In any language resource, even those resources written for more widely taught languages, a certain degree of grammatical terminology is of course required; however the same grammatical terminology that may be required for beginners in French, German or Spanish may not necessarily be required for beginners in Urdu. This section suggests how the traditional analyses of three features of Urdu grammar could be made more efficient.

Rebranding word categories

One way of improving efficiency in the grammatical analysis of Urdu is through reducing the amount of syntactic categories identified. As an example, most Urdu grammar resources (and, indeed, traditional grammars everywhere) would present the following words and suffixes as belonging to entirely different categories, namely: articles, demonstrative adjectives, postpositions, compound postpositions, conjunctions, interjections, suffixes and verb endings (see Schmidt, 2004 as an example):

articles		demonstrative adjectives	
ایک آدمی <i>ek aadmi</i> a man	ایک کتاب <i>ek kitaab</i> a book	یہ آدمی <i>ye aadmi</i> this man	وہ کتاب <i>vo kitaab</i> that book
postpositions		compound postpositions	
پاکستان سے <i>Paakistaan se</i> from Pakistan	گھر میں <i>ghar men</i> in the house	آدمی کے لئے <i>aadmi ke lie</i> for the man	گھر کے اوپر <i>ghar ke oopar</i> above the house
conjunctions		interjections	
اور <i>aur</i> and	لیکن <i>lekin</i> but	ہاں <i>haan</i> yes	سلام <i>salaam</i> hello
suffixes		verb endings	
میز <i>mez</i> table	میزیں <i>mezen</i> tables	بولنا <i>bolna</i> to speak	وہ بولے گا <i>vo bole ga</i> he will speak

However, there is arguably a more efficient way of analysing all these grammatical words and suffixes: by considering their *location* (again, see Young, 2013 and Young, 2014a for a fuller description of the following location-based analysis for Persian and Urdu respectively). All these different words and suffixes have one thing in common: they can be defined by their location in terms of another word. For example, instead of learning that میں is a “postposition” in Urdu, the learner simply learns that (1) it can appear after a noun in order to (2) denote “in”:

گھر میں
ghar men
in the house

Likewise, instead of learning that یہ can be used as a “demonstrative adjective”, the learner simply needs to learn that (1) it can appear before a noun in order to (2) denote “this”:

یہ آدمی
ye aadmi
this man

(This word can of course appear as a singular or plural “demonstrative pronoun” and a singular or plural “third-person pronoun”, which can be learned alongside other nouns). The learner simply needs to learn the position of these “helping” words in relation to the word or phrase they “help” give meaning to (whether they go before or after these words or phrases or whether they are attached to other words)—together with one meaning of the word in English. By doing so, the learner cuts out a vast amount of grammatical terminology. As a result, “articles”, “demonstrative adjectives”, “postpositions”, “compound postpositions”, “conjunctions”, “interjections”, “suffixes” and “verb endings” can thus be considered members of the same category: “helpers” or “helping words”.

Rebranding the oblique case

The second example of the over-analysis of grammar can be found in descriptions of the Urdu “oblique case”. Traditional grammatical analyses of Urdu nouns identify two genders, masculine and feminine, two numbers, singular and plural, and two cases, nominative and oblique (see Asani & Hyder, 2008, Schmidt, 2004 and Ur Rahman, 1998 as examples). Theoretically, there are therefore eight possible forms for nouns in Urdu: masculine nominative singular, masculine nominative plural, masculine oblique singular, masculine oblique plural, feminine nominative singular, feminine nominative plural, feminine oblique singular and feminine oblique plural. These cases are illustrated below for the nouns “لڑکا” – “*lar̥ka*” – “boy”, “گھر” – “*ghar*” – “house”, “لڑکی” – “*lar̥ki*” – “girl” and “میز” – “*mez*” – “table” (see Table 1).

		nominative		oblique	
singular	masculine	لڑکا	<i>lar̥ka</i>	لڑکے	<i>lar̥ke</i>
		گھر	<i>ghar</i>	گھر	<i>ghar</i>
	feminine	لڑکی	<i>lar̥ki</i>	لڑکی	<i>lar̥ki</i>
		میز	<i>mez</i>	میز	<i>mez</i>
plural	masculine	لڑکے	<i>lar̥ke</i>	لڑکوں	<i>lar̥kon</i>
		گھر	<i>ghar</i>	گھروں	<i>gharon</i>
	feminine	لڑکیاں	<i>lar̥kiaa</i>	لڑکیوں	<i>lar̥kion</i>
		میزیں	<i>mezen</i>	میزوں	<i>mezon</i>

Table 1: Traditional noun declensions in Urdu

Likewise, many resources (such as Asani & Hyder, 2008 and Schmidt, 2004) suggest the same for adjectives. Since adjectives often change in Urdu to “agree with” the noun they are describing, adjectives are also presented as having eight possible manifestations. These manifestations are illustrated below using the adjective “اچھا” – “*accha*” – “good” (see Table 2).

		nominative		oblique	
singular	masculine	اچھا لڑکا	accha lar̥ka	اچھے لڑکے	acche lar̥ke
		اچھا گھر	accha ghar	اچھے گھر	acche ghar
	feminine	اچھی لڑکی	acchi lar̥ki	اچھی لڑکی	acchi lar̥ki
		اچھی میز	acchi mez	اچھی میز	acchi mez
plural	masculine	اچھے لڑکے	acche lar̥ke	اچھے لڑکوں	acche lar̥kon
		اچھے گھر	acche ghar	اچھے گھروں	acche gharon
	feminine	اچھی لڑکیاں	acchi lar̥kiaa	اچھی لڑکیوں	acchi lar̥kion
		اچھی میزیں	acchi mezen	اچھی میزوں	acchi mezon

Table 2: Traditional adjective agreement in Urdu

All this information can be radically “compressed” into a more efficient grammatical analysis. As is evident in Table 2, both nouns and adjectives are essentially the same in the nominative and oblique cases; there is subsequently no need to describe two cases at all. In other words, ignoring for the moment the subsequent exceptions, we can simply remove the oblique case from the analysis of nouns in Urdu (see Table 3).

				(remaining exceptions in RED)	
singular	masculine	اچھا لڑکا	accha lar̥ka	اچھے لڑکے	acche lar̥ke
		اچھا گھر	accha ghar	اچھے گھر	acche ghar
	feminine	اچھی لڑکی	acchi lar̥ki		
		اچھی میز	acchi mez		
plural	masculine	اچھے لڑکے	acche lar̥ke	اچھے لڑکوں	acche lar̥kon
		اچھے گھر	acche ghar	اچھے گھروں	acche gharon
	feminine	اچھی لڑکیاں	acchi lar̥kiaa	اچھی لڑکیوں	acchi lar̥kion
		اچھی میزیں	acchi mezen	اچھی میزوں	acchi mezon

Table 3: Removing the oblique case (with remaining exceptions)

If the oblique case is essentially deleted (and thus the need for a separate nominative case similarly redundant), it may seem that there are a lot of exceptions to account for—and, perhaps, too many exceptions to justify removing the oblique case in the first place. These exceptions include all nouns in the oblique plural, masculine singular nouns that end in ۱ and adjectives that describe masculine oblique singular nouns (see Table 3). However, the analysis is justified because these exceptions can be explained very easily.

First, since oblique forms occur in Urdu when the noun is followed by a postposition (and, in the few structures that break this rule, an implied postposition can be posited), the oblique can simply be “rebranded” as “what happens before a postposition” (see Table 4).

				before a postposition	
singular	masculine	اچھا لڑکا اچھا گھر	accha lar̥ka accha ghar	اچھے لڑکے اچھے گھر	acche lar̥ke acche ghar
	feminine	اچھی لڑکی اچھی میز	acchi lar̥ki acchi mez		
plural	masculine	اچھے لڑکے اچھے گھر	acche lar̥ke acche ghar	اچھے لڑکوں اچھے گھروں	acche lar̥kon acche gharon
	feminine	اچھی لڑکیاں اچھی میزیں	acchi lar̥kiaa acchi mezen	اچھی لڑکیوں اچھی میزوں	acchi lar̥kion acchi mezon

Table 4: Rebranding the oblique case

Second, we can say that all plural nouns are made to end in **وں** before a postposition; this accounts for all oblique plural exceptions (see Table 5).

				before a postposition	
singular	masculine	اچھا لڑکا اچھا گھر	accha lar̥ka accha ghar	اچھے لڑکے اچھے گھر	acche lar̥ke acche ghar
	feminine	اچھی لڑکی اچھی میز	acchi lar̥ki acchi mez		
plural	masculine	اچھے لڑکے اچھے گھر	acche lar̥ke acche ghar	لڑکوں گھروں	lar̥kon gharon
	feminine	اچھی لڑکیاں اچھی میزیں	acchi lar̥kiaa acchi mezen	لڑکیوں میزوں	lar̥kion mezon

Table 5: Accounting for oblique plural exceptions

Finally, to account for our remaining exceptions (masculine singular nouns that end in **ا** and adjectives that describe masculine oblique singular nouns), an equally simple rule can be used: a masculine noun *acts plural* before a postposition (see Table 6).

				before a postposition	
singular	masculine	اچھا لڑکا اچھا گھر	accha lar̥ka accha ghar	اچھے لڑکے اچھے گھر	acche lar̥ke acche ghar
	feminine	اچھی لڑکی اچھی میز	acchi lar̥ki acchi mez		
plural	masculine	اچھے لڑکے اچھے گھر	acche lar̥ke acche ghar	لڑکوں گھروں	lar̥kon gharon
	feminine	اچھی لڑکیاں اچھی میزیں	acchi lar̥kiaa acchi mezen	لڑکیوں میزوں	lar̥kion mezon

Table 6: Accounting for masculine oblique singular exceptions

Therefore, instead of positing two noun cases in Urdu, we can simply use two rules. First, before a postposition, masculine nouns act plural and, second, before

a postposition, plural nouns are made to end in **وں** (see Young, 2014a for an example of a resource that uses these two rules as an alternative standard analysis). These two rules, which can be described in a single sentence, can theoretically replace the vast amount of analysis usually used to describe nominative and oblique cases in Urdu (see, as examples, the discussion of the oblique case in Asani & Hyder, 2008 or the extensive use of a multiple case-based analysis for nouns in Ur Rahman, 1998).

Rebranding gender

As mentioned in the previous section, in Urdu (and many other languages, including Arabic and the Romance languages: French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish), traditional grammatical analyses present two genders for nouns: masculine and feminine (Asani & Hyder, 2008; Schmidt, 2004; Ur Rahman, 1998). However, there are alternative—and arguably more efficient—ways of analysing “gender”.

The traditional (and somewhat muddled) analysis of gender is that, when a language is described as having two genders, what this means is that there are nouns that are “naturally” male (i.e., those that denote human males) and nouns that are “naturally” female (i.e., those that denote human females) (see Table 7).

masculine			feminine		
آدمی	<i>aadmi</i>	man	عورت	<i>áurat</i>	woman
لڑکا	<i>laṛka</i>	boy	لڑکی	<i>laṛki</i>	girl
بھائی	<i>bhai</i>	brother	بہن	<i>behn</i>	sister

Table 7: Naturally masculine and feminine nouns

In terms of grammar, these two groups of nouns act differently; for example, an adjective that describes a noun may change depending on whether that noun is masculine or feminine:

میرا بھائی مجھ سے بڑا ہے
mera bhai mujh se bāṛa hei
my brother is older than me

میری بہن مجھ سے بڑی ہے
meri behn mujh se bāṛi hei
my sister is older than me

In the languages mentioned above, all nouns that denote non-human objects *also* act as if they were denoting either human males or human females (see Table 8).

masculine			feminine		
گھر	ghar	house	میز	mez	table
دروازہ	darvaazah	door	کرسی	kursi	chair
پانی	paani	water	دیوار	deevaar	wall

Table 8: Non-human masculine and feminine nouns

وہ دروازہ کالا ہے
vo darvaazah kaala hei
that door is black

یہ کرسی کالی ہے
ye kursi kaali hei
this chair is black

Another traditional way of analysing gender is to remove the “masculine” and “feminine” labels completely and simply say that, in those languages mentioned above, there are two groups of nouns: Group A and Group B. Under this analysis, it just so happens that nouns that denote human males belong to one group and nouns that denote human females belong to another group (see Table 9).

Group A			Group B		
آدمی	aadmi	man	عورت	áurat	woman
لڑکا	lar̥ka	boy	لڑکی	lar̥ki	girl
بھائی	bhai	brother	بہن	behn	sister
گھر	ghar	house	میز	mez	table
دروازہ	darvaazah	door	کرسی	kursi	chair
پانی	paani	water	دیوار	deevaar	wall

Table 9: Group A and Group B nouns

However, there is a third way to analyse gender (see Young, 2014a for a fuller discussion of the following alternative analysis). In all the languages mentioned above, the rules for masculine nouns are, essentially, the *default* rules. For instance, the dictionary form of all adjectives is listed in the masculine singular:

لمبا
lamba
long

ایک لمبی میز
ek lambi mez
a long table

Likewise, groups of mixed-gender nouns are treated as grammatically masculine:

وہ آدمی اچھے ہیں
vo aadmi acche hein
those men are good

وہ عورتیں اچھی ہیں
vo áuraten acchi hein
those women are good

وہ آدمی اور عورتیں اچھے ہیں
vo aadmi aur áuraten acche hein
those men and women are good

Given that the rules for masculine nouns are the default, there is actually no need to divide nouns into groups at all. In a sense, they can all be considered “masculine”—or a hypothetical neutral category (see Table 10).

nouns		
لڑکا	laṛka	boy
بھائی	bhai	brother
کرسی	kursi	chair
دروازہ	darvaazah	door
لڑکی	laṛki	girl
گھر	ghar	house
آدمی	aadmi	man
بہن	behn	sister
میز	mez	table
دیوار	deevaar	wall
پانی	paani	water
عورت	aurat	woman

Table 10: Removing gender

However, the problem then remains of explaining the changes that take place with “feminine” nouns. As a solution, we can *start* by positing special rules that occur when talking about human females; for instance, adjectives ending in ا change this letter to ی when describing a feminine noun:

وہ لڑکا اچھا ہے
vo laṛka accha hei
that boy is good

یہ لڑکی اچھی ہے
ye laṛki acchi hei
this girl is good

It is *then* a conceptually easier step to consider examples in English of calling a ship or a country “she” and applying that same principle to Urdu—but on a much larger scale—to account for *all* feminine nouns. For example, in Urdu, instead of saying that کرسی is a “feminine noun”, we might simply say that the noun کرسی acts as though it denoted a woman (see Table 11).

nouns		
لڑکا	laṛka	boy
بھائی	bhai	brother
کرسی	kursi	chair
دروازہ	darvaazah	door
لڑکی	laṛki	girl
گھر	ghar	house
آدمی	aadmi	man
بہن	behn	sister

nouns		
میز	mez	table
دیوار	deevaar	wall
پانی	paani	water
عورت	áurat	woman

Table 11: Nouns that act as though they denoted women

To summarise, in this alternative analysis, nouns are not divided into two syntactic categories (masculine and feminine). All nouns are treated the same and the learner presumes that any noun he or she encounters uses the default (“masculine”) rules. To account for changes that take place with so-called “feminine” nouns, we can postulate two rules. First, nouns denoting women undergo special changes (such as the change in adjectives mentioned above). Second, some nouns that denote non-human objects, such as books and chairs and walls, are referred to *as if they were women*. What this means is that, instead of learning a “masculine” or “feminine” label for *all* nouns, we are simply learning a special feature of *some* non-human nouns.

This method has two advantages: (1) it is arguably a more efficient way of presenting something as notoriously confusing as gender in Urdu and (2) it is perhaps conceptually easier for English-speaking learners (especially since calling non-human nouns “she” in English is not without precedent and thinking of books and chairs and walls as “women” instead of “feminine nouns” can be introduced in a pedagogically fun way).

In addition, by combining this alternative view of gender with the alternative rules for the “oblique case” discussed in the previous section, we can further “decompress” noun declensions in Urdu (see Table 12) (and see Young, 2014a as an example of how this approach could be incorporated into teaching materials).

				before a postposition
denoting women	singular	اچھا گھر	accha ghar	اچھے گھر
	plural	اچھے گھر	acche ghar	acche ghar
	singular	اچھی لڑکی	acchi lar̥ki	اچھی لڑکیوں
	plural	اچھی لڑکیاں	acchi lar̥kiaaṇ	larkion

*Some nouns denoting non-human objects act as though they denoted women.

Table 12: Rebranding both gender and the oblique case

Implications for other languages

The three examples illustrated so far are measures that might be taken to make resources more appropriate for learners of Urdu. To recap, these measures

include (1) dictionaries and other vocabulary resources that indicate gender, parts of speech and pronunciation and that contain modern vocabulary that is actually used in everyday language, (2) a more efficient way of teaching Urdu script that concentrates on bodies and tails and (3) more efficient grammatical descriptions that dispense with redundant terminology and analyses.

To return to the discussion of the types of learners who are learning Urdu, I would argue that these measures are particularly important if these learners are not learning the language full time, have professional or personal commitments, have no language or linguistic background and are learning Urdu as their first second language. If the majority of Urdu learners do fit this category, it is even more important to make any vocabulary resource, any way of acquiring the script and any grammatical description as efficient and learner friendly as possible. As Shaw wrote over 20 years ago:

If Urdu and Hindi are to be recognised as languages of equal status to other modern languages... then they need to be taught by methods that are appropriate for the students, and teach them what they want to say.
(1991, p.vii)

This is not to say that grammatical descriptions in “other modern languages” are perfect—far from it. Specifically, the measures that could be taken in Urdu in terms of categories of word, noun case and gender could in fact be applied to *all* languages—not just Urdu. Likewise, although the need to take such measures is perhaps more urgent, given the type of learner identified earlier and the relative scarcity of materials, it could be argued that more efficient grammatical descriptions would benefit *any* learner.

Therefore, this paper suggests, as an avenue of future research, that such measures be applied to grammatical descriptions in more widely taught languages. In fact, given that the traditional grammatical analysis of Urdu (and other relatively lesser taught languages like Arabic, Persian and Turkish) is perhaps not as entrenched or established as more widely taught languages (such as the Romance languages, English or German), there is a clear opportunity to establish new—and more efficient—alternative systems of grammatical analysis for all languages (see Young, in press, 2014b and 2014c for examples of applying the same alternative grammatical system to languages from three different language families—Arabic, Turkish and Spanish respectively).

Conclusion

In this paper, I presented my own experience as a learner of Urdu. I suggested that the type of learner that is learning Urdu is changing: increasingly, learners may be older professionals without language backgrounds, who are learning Urdu as a first second language in a part-time community college setting for personal or professional reasons. I then described the implications of this change on resources available for Urdu learners: that such resources need to reflect that these learners may have little time and lack explicit knowledge of grammatical terms. I then suggested that current resources are often inappropriate for this type of learner and highlighted three areas of improvement: (1) vocabulary resources that include everyday vocabulary and indicate gender, parts of speech and pronunciation, (2) a more efficient method of teaching Urdu script that uses bodies and tails and (3) more efficient grammatical analyses of categories of word, the oblique case and gender. Finally, I suggested an avenue of future research in which these same principles are applied to more widely taught languages.

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